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ABSTRACT

Conversation reminds us that we are not alone, that shared language is the opportunity to try on our many masks to see how many of them we can do without. The variety of pleasures accrued from conversation--"layers of pleasure"--deepen only as they move away from the individual orbits into the circle of mutual experience. When conversation is effortless and witty, it elicits a fleeting pleasure--"Narcissus." "Phatic communion" (small talk) is less superficial because it seeks pleasure not only in serving the self, but in letting others know you desire to identify with them. Unfortunately, this exchange usually becomes our most conspicuous escape from intimacy. The layer where pleasure is profound enough to last a lifetime is called "self-discovery." This level constitutes the truth that we cannot come to know ourselves except as we see ourselves in the eyes of another. Conversation at its deepest level of pleasure is called "mutual discovery." This type of conversation transcends the parties involved and must be instantly recognized as being close to the core of life itself. (EE)

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The Personal Enjoyment of Conversation

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Don't be alarmed if I begin with Socrates. I promise to make him relevant immediately, or discard him (in keeping with the best modern educational practice). Frankly, I've had reservations about him for a long time (I suspect him, for example, of doing his share of manipulating). But I am tremendously impressed with the way he died. The legendary Zorba, you will remember, leaped out of bed, as his final act, dug his nails into the window sill and gave out with a whinnying, crazy laugh. Beethoven raised up in bed and shook his fist in defiance. Even the death of Jesus was full of pain and anguish.

Not so with Socrates. You remember the scene in the cave. Socrates tranquil, smiling. His friends alternately trying to beguile him into somehow avoiding his death, and weeping when he refused. His wife, Xantippe, and the children coming in for a last word with him. His quiet, almost casual, conversation with them. You remember how his friend Crito had come early that morning to make one last appeal to him to save himself. And Socrates had said (if you will forgive the free paraphrase), "Wait a minute, wait a minute, Crito. Sit down here and let's talk this through again -- although we've done it many times before. Let us ask ourselves the question, 'Would it be more just for me to try to escape the punishment of the State or to abide by it?'" And after they had gone gently through the whole examination of it, Socrates concluded that their thinking, which Crito had agreed to before, was just as right now as it had been then. He says, "The sound

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of these arguments rings so loudly in my ears, that I cannot hear any other arguments." Crito responds, "I have nothing more to say."

Then Socrates asks the dispenser of the hemlock how to proceed. He is told to drink all of the poison in the cup, then to walk to and fro until his legs start to feel heavy. He carries out these instructions, and, as if he were off on some delightful new adventure, starts strolling back and forth, chatting happily all the while with his friends. When his legs begin to feel heavy he lies down and they draw the sheet up on him, the executioner explaining that as the poison works its way up his body it will at last reach his brain, and all will be finished. Soon they pull the sheet up over his head. But just when they think he must surely have died, he uncovers his head and says (in effect), "Oh, by the way, Crito, I forgot to make my sacrifice to Asclepius (to whom one sacrificed on recovering from an illness). Don't forget to do that for me." Then he pulls the sheet over his head, and the next time they uncover him he is dead.

Fantastic! Pure peace of mind! A man who, at his death, had it all together -- who was one with himself and with his fate. I don't know how he did it, but I have a theory: Through a lifetime he gave himself so totally to the pleasures of conversation at every level that he came to know who he was, and who others were, and what he wanted from life and what he could give to it. He spent so much of his time in conversation Xantippe should have divorced him instead of periodically screaming at him and beating him with a broom. But he achieved a level of happiness and sublimity that has got to be the envy of us lesser twentieth century mortals.

Joost Meerloo says at one point that, "Conversation is the joyous art of doing nothing." But the rest of his very perceptive book on

Conversation and Communication points to satisfactions that go far beyond that. The pleasures of conversation surely run all the way from tingling the epidermis to penetrating the very core of one's being. It helps me to conceive of them as Layers of Pleasure, and if the onion analogy doesn't make you weep, I would like to peel them off, one by one, until we get to the heart of things.

The outer layer is called Narcissus. Let us face up to it: when conversation goes right -- when words tumble effortlessly from your lips; when wit and poetry spring forth so spontaneously that even you are impressed; when, in short, your blood races with the realization that you are, forsooth, a remarkable person -- that is pleasure. There is something about it, though, that makes it a fleeting pleasure. It seems too turned in on itself. Heady stuff at the moment, but in the light of the next day, when the head is starting to clear, it turns from living color to pale gray. In his Journal, Soren Kierkegaard has this entry: "I have just returned from a party of which I was the life and soul; wit poured from my lips, everyone laughed and admired me -- but I went away -- and wanted to shoot myself." No lasting pleasure that.

Onward, then, to a deeper level, Phatic Communion ("small talk" for those innocent of General Semantics). I see this as less superficial than Narcissus, because it seeks its pleasure not only in serving the self, but also in letting the other know you want to identify yourself with him. I walk a mile to the campus, by a route especially designed to help me avoid friends in automobiles who might want to pick me up. That makes it possible for me to meet children, whose unpredictable replies never cease to nourish me. Two homely

examples: I meet a seventh-grade boy skillfully balancing a trombone in his bicycle basket on the way to school. "You're early, John," I say. "Well, yes," says he as he rounds the corner, "either that, or you're late." I feel good about that. We have broken the silence between us, and have said, for all the world to hear, that we will have something to do with each other. That noon, as I am walking back from the campus, I meet a little second grade brunette. As I approach her I burst into creative speech, "How are you today?" "I'm fine," she says. Then she stops and smiles up at me, and says, "How has your day been?" I am totally disarmed and rendered almost speechless. But I go happily on my way. The exchange does not go very far, but it is the unmistakable tip-off that no one need walk alone; that voice and gesture are at the service of relationship.

Phatic communion is, unfortunately, unlimited. It becomes, too often, our most conspicuous escape from intimacy in a society that has developed verbal shadow-boxing to a fine art. Martin Buber says it should not be mistaken for real dialogue, because in it "each regards himself as absolute and legitimate and the other as relativized and questionable." And he goes on to say that Lover's Talk is not much better -- just two people each enjoying his own glorious soul and his precious experience.

So we come to another layer, where the pleasure is profound enough sometimes to last a lifetime. This layer I call Self-discovery. It is hard to beat that moment in which one "sees" a portion of himself he has never seen before. And this can occur unexpectedly, in the midst of conversation, as one hears his own voice or has his inner

voice triggered by a partner in the verbal dance. I'm talking about the kind of pleasure that broke in on a friend of mine when she realized, in the very presence of a lively conversation, that she wasn't driven to talk -- that she felt comfortable enough with herself that she could endure silence. Such discoveries are infinite in number and range. They constitute no less than the astounding truth that we cannot come to know ourselves except as we see ourselves in the eyes of another.

But conversation at its deepest level, says Meerloo, is the groping of one person for another. And so, the deepest Layer of Pleasure is called Mutual Discovery -- or in Buber's terms, Dialogue. Moments of this kind of pleasure cannot be reduced to words. They can only be recognized and appreciated after they have happened. They transcend the individuals involved. They approach what Maslow has called "peak experience". What is the shape of conversation that produces such moments? Buber describes it like this:

> Each person has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.

When that intention is mutually and simultaneously achieved, there is magic -- and there is pleasure that is instantly recognized as close to the core of life itself. Every now and then a student will tell you about how that happened with a prent; every now and then you will taste it in your own life. But it is rare -- a jewel almost smothered in the mounds of nondescript communication pebbles that make up our everyday conversation.

From Narcissus to Mutual Discovery is 10,000 miles at least. And although pleasures are available all along the way, they deepen and be-

come more enduring only as they move away from the individual orbits into the circle of mutual experience. "At what moment," asks Teilhard de Chardin, "do lovers come into the most complete possession of themselves, if not when they are lost in each other?"

Conversation is, indeed, the reminder that we are not alone; that shared language can pierce the demilitarized zones that stand between us. Conversation, at its best, is the earthbound man's flight into promising new realms of awareness. Conversation is the opportunity to try on our many masks -- to see how many of them we can do without.

Socrates sampled all the pleasures of conversation. There is no need for him to be the last to do it.